

An Exploration of Bachelors of Social Work Students' Personal and Professional Perspectives on  
Spirituality and Religion

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Science in Social  
Work in the College of Social Work of The Ohio State University

By

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2011

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### Abstract

There is growing recognition in society and in the social work profession of the importance of spirituality and religion in shaping the human experience. Engaging spirituality in social work practice is a crucial component of cultural competence and holistic care of clients. Existing research focuses on the practitioner and graduate student populations, with little understanding of how the findings may apply to undergraduate education. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap in knowledge by exploring the personal and professional perspectives of Bachelors of Social Work students. Specifically, this study focuses on students' views of the importance of spirituality and religion in social work education and practice. Data was collected from both public and private universities across the state of Ohio using an online survey. Eleven of the twenty four CSWE accredited schools of social work (46%) participated. The survey was limited to students who have completed a minimum of 4 social work courses and yielded 185 responses. The survey assessed students' perception of the role of religion and spirituality in social work, their educational experience, and personal spirituality. Findings suggest that regardless of one's religious beliefs and type of institution, students overwhelmingly support incorporating topics of spirituality and religion into social work education. However, ones religious affiliation influences beliefs about how spirituality should be incorporated in social work practice. Further, students at public universities report that their schools were more likely to discriminate, censor, and be close minded to the expression of religious and spiritual beliefs than students attending private universities. Only close to quarter percent of students indicated having received course content relevant to spirituality and religion (23.2%). Findings suggest improving the curriculum to include spiritual and religious content into social work education to prepare future professionals who are culturally competent to practice with clients from diverse spiritual and religious backgrounds. .

## Dedication

To spiritual seekers everywhere,  
may you find true meaning, purpose, and significance in life.

### Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the assistance and encouragement of many people to which I owe my deepest thanks. First, I would like to acknowledge my parents Dr. Steve and Lisa Neal for imparting a love of learning and a belief that I have the ability to make my dreams reality. Next, there are many people at the OSU College of Social Work who deserve my thanks, specifically Jennie Babcock and Andrea Severson for their unending support and encouragement. I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Shantha Balaswamy, for her mentorship and guidance throughout this entire research process. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the love and support of my husband-to-be, Jake Wheeler, even though he claims this project was completely his idea. Thank you all, I hope you look on this work with pride and know that it contains a piece of each of you.

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Field of Study

Major Field: Social Work

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## Chapter 1: Statement of Research Topic

### Introduction

Social Work training and ethical mandates call upon Social Workers to address clients within their bio-psycho-social environment and work with every factor contributing to their present problem. The majority of people in the United States hold some spiritual beliefs and consider their faith to be a significant factor in their lives (Smolak & Williams, 2007). Similarly religion, for many, is an important source of meaning, well-being, and a valuable resource during life challenges (Burcham & DeCoster, 2002). Many clients desire to integrate their spiritual belief system into therapeutic treatment (Hodge, 2005). In addition, a growing body of literature indicates that spirituality is often a significant client strength and an important asset to help clients cope with difficult life circumstances (Hodge, 2005). To neglect the spiritual aspect of a client deprives them of experiencing a full spectrum of discovery, healing, and growth (Smolak & Williams, 2007).

However, the social work profession has been noticeably silent on the topic of spirituality in education, training, and practice. The absence of attention to spirituality and religion is inconsistent with social work's foundational values of inclusive and holistic practice. Spirituality can be understood as the human search for meaning, purpose and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality, however one understands it (Sheridan, 2000) and practiced differently based on one's culture. Religion differs in that it involves an organized, structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community that is related to spirituality (Sheridan, 2000) and varies depending on one's religious affiliation. Although separate yet often overlapping concepts, both spirituality and religion are significant in the lives of most clients that social workers interact with in various settings. At its core, the social work profession is ever

striving for cultural competence and inclusiveness of all peoples. Spirituality and religion are finally gaining recognition as a critical component of client care. With a proven research foundation driving practice and specialized training in the field, social workers can be leaders in the incorporation of spirituality and religion into the helping professions. It is vital to understand the personal and professional attitudes of the next generation of social workers for they will shape the future of the profession.

### Statement of the Problem

In recent years, spirituality has gained professional attention as a relevant aspect of social work practice and topic for research. Research has focused on professional attitudes of graduate students and practitioners towards client spirituality and its role in social work practice (Sheridan, 2009). Many studies have investigated the inclusion of spirituality by social work practitioners and the factors influencing the use of spirituality in client interventions (Sheridan, 2009). Of these, personal spirituality and professional attitudes of the student or practitioner have emerged as the most significant factors influencing the use of spiritually based interventions (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009). Consistently, authors point back to social work education and training to equip the next generation of social workers to engage clients in their religion and spirituality (Sheridan, 2009). There is little understanding of the extent to which undergraduate social work students receive course content which embeds religion and spirituality, and their personal attitude towards integration of such content.

This research is positioned to fill a gap in the literature and current professional knowledge. Building off of significant findings in previous studies, personal spirituality and professional attitudes will be the key variables examined. The Bachelors of Social Work (BSW)

student population forms the foundation of the next generation of professional social workers. Upon graduation, BSW students can become licensed social workers (LSW) and practice with clients in a variety of settings, only excluding clinical and administrative roles. Social workers with a BSW degree often work with clients dealing with serious illness, abuse, grief, and poverty, which can all be very spiritually charged issues. Graff (2007) reported that BSW students overwhelmingly agree that social work education should include content on religious and spiritual diversity (86.1%) and how to effectively deal with religious and spiritual issues in practice (87.6%). However, BSW students reported that they are not equipped to engage clients in their spirituality and religion as part of practice. Although these students are considered to be professionally ready to engage in work with clients and part of continuum of social work education, they are frequently excluded in research for improving curriculum, especially on the topic of spirituality.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the professional attitudes towards spirituality and religion of BSW students and the factors that are associated with these attitudes. As personal spirituality has been a consistent predictor in previous research, this study also measured the level of spirituality in this group. As Bachelors of Social Work programs are the training ground for future practitioners, a better understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of this population will give perspective on the impending future of spirituality in the Social Work profession. This study surveyed BSW students to assess their personal and professional opinions on spirituality and religion. Data was collected on a variety of variables, including personal spirituality, religion, and educational/professional experience, that have been shown to influence professional attitudes about the role of religion and spirituality in practice. This research fills an

important gap in the literature and improves the understanding of the current state of integration of spirituality and religion in Bachelors of Social Work education. By exploring both personal and professional beliefs about spirituality and religion, this study will increase understanding of both these beliefs systems in the social work profession. Specifically, this study explored answers to the following two research questions:

### Research Questions

1. What is the level of spirituality of Social Work students?
2. To what extent does the students' demographics, personal spirituality, and educational experience associated with their professional attitudes towards religion and spirituality in social work practice?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### The Importance of Spirituality in Social Work

Smolak & Williams (2007) conducted a literature review explaining the current state of spirituality and religion in social work education and the common reasons for and against its inclusion in social work education. Their position calls social workers to uphold their own ethic of addressing the entire context within which clients live and from which their problems emerge. Spirituality is explained as a crucial element of holistic practice because every client has a faith perspective. To not include that perspective is limiting to the profession. Despite evidence presented from practitioners, students, faculty, and clients that all recognize the need for social workers to be educated and trained in working with and across spiritual and religious issues, schools of social work appear to be neglecting the topic.

Social Work practice and education is directed by ethical guidelines. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999) contains several references to the need for competence in religious diversity. Specifically, the NASW Code of Ethics indicates that social workers should obtain education about religious diversity and the oppression religious groups encounter (1.05c), avoid unwarranted negative criticism and derogatory language based on religion (2.01b; c.f. 1.12), refrain from facilitating religious discrimination (4.02), and actively work to prevent and eliminate religious discrimination (6.04d). Social workers should also have knowledge of faith based cultures, demonstrate cultural competence and sensitivity (1.05b), and recognize strengths that exist in faith based cultures (1.05).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) also addresses the need for training on spirituality and religion in educational programs. It mandates that programs are to ensure that

their graduates have been exposed to “theories and knowledge of...spiritual development” (p.35). Graduates are also expected to demonstrate the capacity to “practice without discrimination and with respect, knowledge, ad skills related to clients’... religion,” similar to other important dimensions of difference, such as age, class, race, sex, and sexual orientation (p.33). In a review of the literature, Sheridan (2008) found that the majority of social workers are not receiving adequate preparation from their professional training programs to address religious and spiritual issues in practice. In general, social workers reported receiving little to no instruction in this area, dissatisfaction with their educational experience, have ideas about how educational programs could provide this content, and often seek out training on their own to address their educational deficit. Sheridan concludes his article with several recommendations, including incorporating content on religion and spirituality in both the undergraduate and graduate curriculums and further research with social work students.

In addition, major accreditation agencies, such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), now require Social Work practitioners to conduct spiritual assessments. Social work education should reflect these new standards and prepare students for competent practice with clients of diverse religious and faith traditions (Hodge, 2005b).

Bushfield & Hodge (2006) defined and operationalized the concept of spiritual competence in social work practice. The article addressed the concern in the profession of how to engage spirituality in therapeutic settings. Spiritual competence is described as another form of cultural competence, which is a central value of social work professionals cited in the NASW Code of Ethics. It is known that the success of cross-cultural interactions is largely contingent on the practitioner’s level of cultural, or in this case, spiritual competence. Spiritual competence

is comprised of three continual processes: 1) awareness of one's own spiritual worldview and its assumptions, limitations, and biases 2) developing empathic understanding of the client's spiritual worldview that is devoid of negative judgment 3) increasing ability to design and implement intervention strategies that are appropriate, relevant, and sensitive to the client's spiritual worldview. The authors also noted an interesting incongruence between spiritual views of social workers and their clients. While the majority of the public affirms theistic worldviews, social workers disproportionately hold non-theistic views. This makes it even more vital for social workers to be aware of their own views and biases and their possible effects on client interactions.

#### Personal Spirituality as an Important Factor in the Use of Spiritual Interventions

Koeske, Koeske & Stewart (2006) conducted a study to explore the relationship between the use of spiritual interventions and the personal spirituality and religiosity of the practitioner. The study found that personal spirituality was uniquely significant and had a direct affect on the use of spiritual interventions, beyond religious group membership and participation in organized religion. Respondents generally favored incorporating religion into practice, even those who identified themselves as unbelievers. The majority of the spiritual interventions suggested were acceptable to over 60% of the respondents. This article had very significant findings that support both the influence of personal spirituality and professional attitudes on the use of spiritual interventions with clients.

In a related field, Senstock & VanAsselt (2009) conducted a study to explore the relationship between the personal spirituality of a professional counselor, their focus in therapy, and self-perceived confidence in addressing spiritual issues with clients. This study surveyed professionals and students in professional counseling using three instruments, two measuring

personal spirituality and the third level of competence in addressing spiritual issues with clients. The study found that a counselor's personal spirituality, spiritual experience, and spirituality training did significantly influence treatment focus as well as the counselor's self-perceived competence in addressing spiritual concerns with a client.

Kvarfordt & Sheridan (2009) conducted secondary data analysis from a national sample of clinical social workers to understand the pathway of factors influencing the use of spiritually based interventions in Social Work practice. This article is unique in that it considers all the variables and describes the influencing factors in a chain of events which lead to the use of interventions. The pathway they found began with personal religious/spiritual practices which led to professional attitudes, then practice related experiences with spirituality and religion, which all contributed to intervention use. Personal practices were significant in this study but to a much smaller degree than previous research (1.2% of variance). Professional attitudes accounted for the majority of influence on use of interventions (52% of variance). Another notable finding is the absence of variables related to professional education and training as significant factors. This article is the first to outline a theoretical framework of how different factors influence the use of spiritual interventions in social work practice.

### Professional Attitudes

To understand how social workers define the constructs of spirituality and religion, Boddie and Hodge (2007) researched the affect of social work graduate students' personal spiritual characteristics on their understanding of spirituality and religion. The study found that faith tradition, orthodoxy, and spiritual motivation were all unrelated to how respondents defined spirituality. The results showed that social workers are defining spirituality and religion in a manner similar to the public they serve. The authors did not explore other means by which



social workers' definitions of these concepts may come, such as education and training. Since the authors did not investigate the other areas that influence the definition, the results may simply point to cohesiveness in social work education.

Many recent studies have explored professional attitudes of social workers towards addressing religion and spirituality with clients. One study in particular, Burcham & DeCoster (2002), conducted an exploratory study to investigate the attitudes of graduate Social Work students towards client religion. The study asked participants about their comfort addressing religion with clients, their beliefs about religion in the lives of their clients, and their beliefs about the use of religion in practice. The study found that social work students recognized religion as an important aspect of their clients. However, they were ambiguous on how to work out this concern. Student religious affiliation and practice had the greatest influence on their attitudes and comfort with religious factors. The findings of this study reiterate the profession's growing discussion of the importance of religion as well as the continual ambiguity on how it is to be addressed in practice.

Graff (2007) conducted a study to explore Bachelors of Social Work students' beliefs about the inclusion of spiritual and religious content in the social work curriculum. The author examined the students' perceptions on the role of spirituality and religion in social work, the student's personal religious beliefs, how students see their beliefs affecting future practice, and their view on the place of spirituality and religion in social work education. The students strongly believed in the relevance of spirituality and religion to social work. The study also included a thorough assessment of the population's spiritual and religious demographics. In this review, Graff (2007) was the only study conducted using a Bachelors student sample. Clearly, there is a need for further research with this population.

### Summary Statement

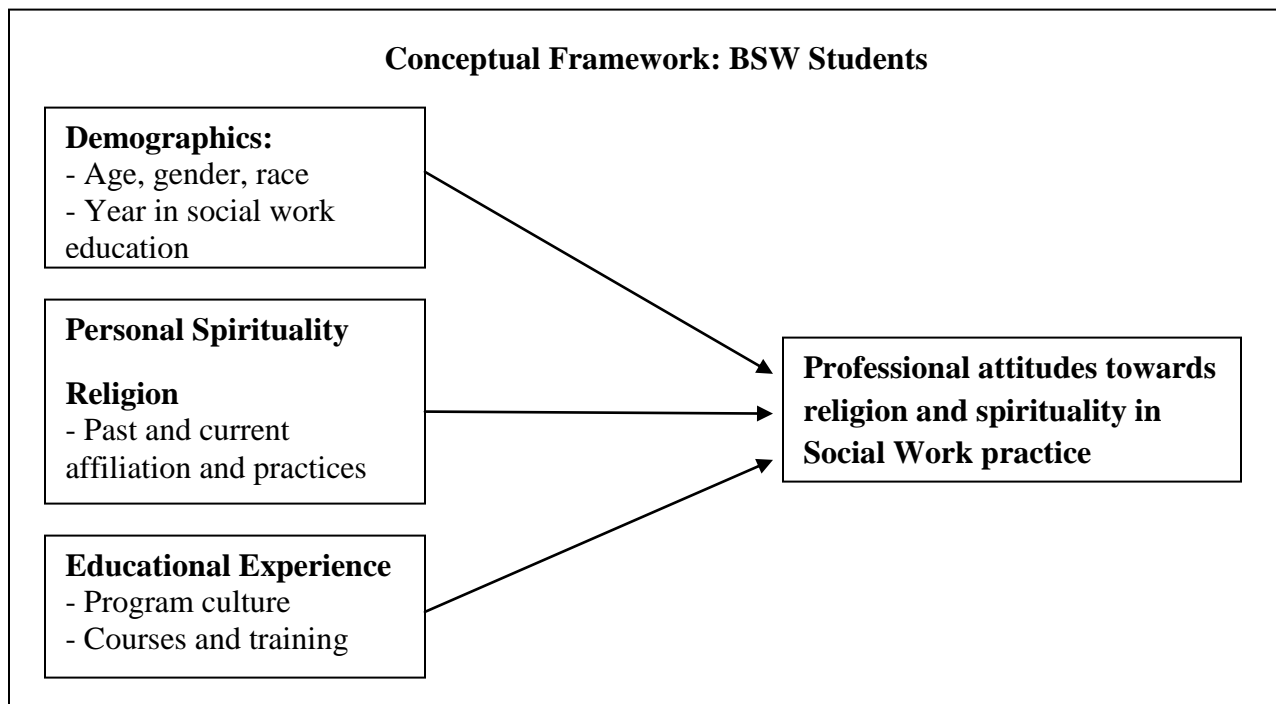
Through reviewing the literature, it is clear that there is a need for further research, education, and implementation of spirituality and religion in the social work education. In order to meet standards of competence set by the social work governing bodies (NASW and CSWE), social workers must have knowledge and skills to address spirituality and religion with their clients. Personal spirituality and professional attitudes have emerged as key factors predicting the integration of spirituality and religion in practice. Researchers consistently point to educational programs to equip the next generation of social work professionals. The vast majority of research has been conducted with a sample of graduate students or practicing social workers. Little research attention has been given to Bachelors student perspective, which this study intends to address this gap in knowledge.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Conceptual Framework

This study was designed to test the relationship between professional attitudes towards religion and spirituality in social work practice and several independent variables. The independent variables were selected based on findings from previous literature that proved to be important contributing factors to professional attitudes. The independent variables include personal spirituality and religious practices, educational experience with spirituality and religion, and basic demographics of age, gender, race, and year in school. This framework was used to describe the relationships between the variables such as demographics, personal spirituality, and educational exposure, and professional attitudes towards religion and spirituality in social work practice. It was also used to test the factors that are likely to influence professional attitudes of students.

Figure 1



### 3.2 Research Design

Quantitative measures were used to test the proposed research questions. The information gathered produced quantifiable results that were tested statistically. Data was collected from a group of social work undergraduate students at one point in time to assess the experiences of participants. Due to the constraints of time, it was not possible to assess spirituality and perceptions of practice over time, that is before and after being enrolled in social work courses. To compensate for this deficit, the survey included questions about variables that are known to influence spirituality, such as religious affiliation (past and present), training received in spirituality, and experience in their social work program. The cross sectional research design also compensated for the limitation of time by including questions on participants past experiences. This study is descriptive in nature, as it seeks to describe the current beliefs and attitudes of Bachelors students on spirituality and religion and factors associated with it. Causation could not be derived from this study because data was collected retrospectively. But the data collected was analyzed using bivariate statistics (correlation, chi-square) to assess presence of any significant relationships among the variables in this study. The findings are applicable to the population from which the sample was drawn and therefore cannot be generalized to other programs in the country.

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using an online survey developed through the SurveyMonkey program available via internet. These surveys were distributed through email sent by the researcher to participating colleges of social work across the state of Ohio. An initial email was

sent to the program directors at participating colleges which the director then forwarded to all BSW students in their program. This email contained information describing the research, the time commitment, a statement of confidentiality and a link to the online survey, which participants clicked to access the survey upon agreeing to participate. Further, no identifiable data was requested for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality. When students followed the link, the first screen of the survey explained the study and asked for participant consent. Participants had a two week window to complete the survey and a reminder email was sent on day ten to increase participation rate. Participants had the option of entering their email address if they wanted to be included in the drawing for Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate. Two participants, i.e. individuals entering the survey though not necessarily completing it, were randomly selected to receive a \$50 amazon.com gift card. The gift cards were distributed electronically through email at the end of the data collection period. All email addresses were removed before data analysis and participation in the drawing was not required.

### 3.4 Sampling Plan

The sampling frame for this study was all of the CSWE accredited universities in the state of Ohio offering Bachelors degrees in social work, as the researcher was interested in surveying undergraduate social work students. The level of analysis was individual and each participant answered questions about their personal beliefs, experiences, and attitudes. To access the student sample, first a letter was sent to all the College of Social Work Department Heads in the state of Ohio asking for their permission to survey the students and soliciting their aid in emailing surveys to potential participants. Follow-up was done by email and phone to each of the universities to obtain their permission to survey their students. There are 24 accredited Bachelors of Social Work programs in Ohio. This allowed the results to be generalized to the

whole population of social work students in Ohio. The target sample size is 200 students. The goal of the sampling plan was to survey a diverse and representative sample of BSW students.

### Sample

Of the 24 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited undergraduate social work programs in Ohio, 11 programs agreed to participate in this study (45.8%). According to the CSWE, the approximate number of undergraduate Social Work students in Ohio is 2,779, for 2010. A total of 185 students participated in the online survey which was slightly below the expected level of sample size (i.e., 200 students). The data collected equals 6.65% of the total population of undergraduate social work students in the state. Generally, the expected norm for online surveys are much higher (20 to 30% ) than response rate for this study. However, it is impossible to calculate an exact response rate for the target sample because there is no record of how many total students have completed the required minimum of three social work courses to be eligible to participate in this study, which was criteria for participation in this study. The assumption was that students with experience were more knowledgeable in responding to questions of the integration of spirituality and religious course content. The BSW students were from 5 private colleges and 6 public universities reflecting a variation in type of schools, program size and location (urban/rural) within the state.

### 3.5 Measurement

#### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable, professional attitudes, was measured using the Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice scale (RRSP). This scale was developed to assess the professional attitudes of social workers and their view of these issues in social work practice. The content of

Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice scale focuses on beliefs about the importance of various aspects of spirituality and religion to the Social Work profession. It consists of several major dimensions and items include: the importance of knowledge of religious and spiritual traditions; assessment of positive and negative roles of religion and spiritual beliefs for clients; the appropriateness of using religious or spiritual language and concepts in practice; and the importance of including content on spirituality and religion in social work education (Graff, 2007). The RRSP consists of an 18-item and responses on a scale which measures the level of agreement ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. This scale possesses good face and content validity and has previously obtained good estimates of reliability for previous samples of practitioners (alpha = .81) (Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992), educators (alpha = .87) (Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994) and students (alpha = .82) (Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999). This scale has also demonstrated evidence of both convergent and divergent construct validity (Sheridan, 2000). The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice Scale will be an appropriate measure for assessing the attitudes of Social Work students towards the inclusion of religion and spirituality in Social Work practice. This scale is standardized and tested for its validity and reliability. The scale has been used in a variety of studies, including some very similar to the one proposed, and has been shown to be an excellent tool for assessing professional attitudes of social workers (Sheridan, 2004).

### Independent Variables

Major Independent Variables:

- 1) Personal spirituality was operationalized using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES). It is a 16-item self-report instrument designed to measure the experience of spirituality in ordinary, everyday life. The items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale

of how often one experiences the item in their life, ranging from 1 = many times a day to 5 = never or almost never. The exception is item 16, *In general, how close do you feel to God?* and response is measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 4 = as close as possible. The cronbach's alpha for the scale is consistently above 0.9 (Underwood's Daily Spiritual Experience Scale). This scale has been used in a wide range of studies and the results support that spiritual experience is a condition that changes based on individuals experiences and that one is not predisposed to being spiritual (i.e. trait-like)

Underwood's DSES is a good instrument to measure spirituality in this study. Although this scale makes reference to God, the instructions direct one to interpret God into their own understanding of the divine. In that interpretation, the scale can be used to assess spirituality in those from any religious or faith tradition. This scale is designed to assess the presence of spirituality in daily life, which is what previous research has shown affects professional attitudes towards spirituality and religion and the use of spiritual interventions with clients (Graff, 2007; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009; Koeske, Koeske, & Stewart, 2006). This research used this scale to describe the relationship between personal spirituality and professional attitudes. Testing this relationship helped determine whether personal spirituality is an important factor in understanding the professional attitudes in practice.

- 2) Educational experience was operationalized using several dimensions. The Spiritual Competence Scale is a new tool created to assess perceptions of spiritual competence at the programmatic level. This 8-item scale asks participants to evaluate the level of cultural competence that is fostered in their BSW program. Response choices range from



-5 (extreme incompetence) to 5 (advanced competence). As a newly developed scale, it has undergone thorough statistical testing. Results from a recent study showed a Cronbach's alpha of .923 and strong convergent and divergent validity (Hodge, 2007). The results from the proposed study will also be tested to assess the validity of this new competency measure. For this purpose, additional items were added including: "To what extent is religious or spiritual discrimination a problem in your social work program?" and the four NASW ethical standards asking their perception of compliance with these standards. These items were used to test for convergent and divergent validity in the scale.

The purpose of using this tool was to understand the experience of students in their BSW program as well as their perception of the level of spiritual and religious cultural competence that exists in their program. A few additional factual items were added as part of the educational experience component. These items include: type of university (state, private, or religious), number of semesters/quarters in the social work program, number of social work classes completed, and whether they have taken a course on spirituality or religion. These items assess the level of exposure to spirituality and religion in the educational setting.

The other Independent Variables will be measured as follows:

- 1) Age – respondents were asked to report their current age
- 2) Gender – respondents were asked to select their gender identity (male, female, prefer not to answer)

- 3) Race – respondents were asked to choose the race with which they most closely identify. Response categories will include: 1) Asian 2) Black/African American 3) Hispanic/Latino 4) White/Caucasian 5) Multi-racial
- 4) Religion was measured using 4 dimensions:
- a. Current Religious Affiliation - respondents were asked to identify which religious or faith tradition they currently belong to. The response categories will include: 1) Catholic Christian 2) Conservative/Fundamentalist Christian 3) Mainline Protestant Christian 4) Nondenominational Christian 5) Islam 6) Buddhist 7) Jewish 8) Hindu 9) Spiritist 10) Atheist 11) Agnostic 12) Undecided
  - b. Current Religious Practice: respondents were asked to identify how often they attend religious services and activities (i.e. mass, prayer meeting, bible study etc.) The response categories will include: 1) never 2) once or twice a year 3) once or twice a month 4) once a week 5) more than once a week.
  - c. Childhood Religious Upbringing – respondents were asked to identify the religious or faith tradition in which they were raised. The response categories will include: 1) Catholic Christian 2) Conservative/Fundamentalist Christian 3) Mainline Protestant Christian 4) Nondenominational Christian 5) Islam 6) Buddhist 7) Jewish 8) Hindu 9) Spiritist 10) Atheist 11) Agnostic 12) Unknown
  - d. Childhood Religious Practice: respondents were asked to identify how often they attended religious services and activities as a child (i.e. mass, prayer meeting, bible study etc.) The response categories includes: 1) never 2) once

or twice a year 3) once or twice a month 4) once a week 5) more than once a week.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

After data collection was complete, the raw data was downloaded from surveymonkey.com to an excel spreadsheet and then transferred to SPSS software for analysis. Obtained data was then coded and cleaned for wild codes and missing responses. The primary methods of data analysis used were frequencies, crosstabs, chi squares, and correlations. Frequencies were used for description of demographics and to tally individual items for each scale. To answer the major research questions, correlation statistics was used to assess the relationship between demographics and composite scores on the major scales and items within each scale when appropriate. Before analyzing the relationship between the major variables and the scales, the main scales were tested for reliability using the Chronbach's Alpha. All three scales were found to have good reliability (see Table 1 below) and internal validity consistent with the original scales used by pervious researchers (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009; Underwood, 2011; Hodge, 2007).

<b>Table 1: Psychometric Properties of RRSP, DSES, and SCS Scales (N = 185)</b>					
Scale	# Items	Response Categories	Scale Range	Mean (S.D.)	$\alpha$
<b>RRSP</b> (Professional Attitudes)	18	5-pt	45 - 90	70.4 (8.7)	.85
<b>DSES</b> (Personal Spirituality)	15	6-pt	24 - 90	64.8 (18.6)	.96
<b>SCS</b> (Spiritual Competence of Program)	9	-5 – 5	-45 - 45	20.6 (19.5)	.95

The alpha coefficient for the RRSP scale for the current sample was .85. This instrument has shown relatively high estimates of reliability in previous research with alpha coefficients ranging from .81 to .91 (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009) and the current reliability is consistent with earlier findings. The reliability of the DSES is .96 slightly higher than the range found in previous research of .89-.95 (Underwood, 2011). The reliability for the SCS was also slightly higher than previous research which yielded a alpha coefficient of .923 (Hodge, 2007).

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Demographics of Sample

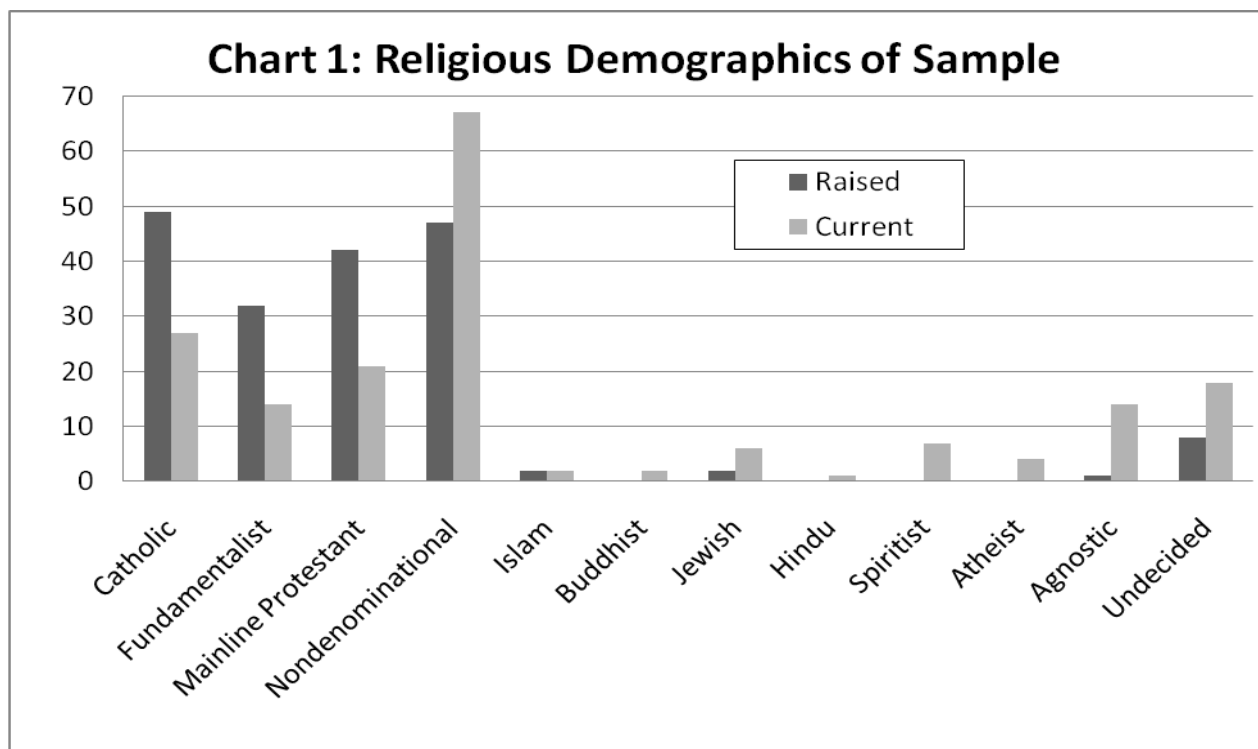
#### Social Background

Of the 185 students who participated in the survey, the majority of respondents (81.1%) attend a state university. All of the private schools in this study were affiliated with the Christian faith, which is typical for the Midwest. A high percent of participants identify as juniors or seniors in their Social Work program (94.1%) and all have completed at least three social work courses. More than half (52.4%) of respondents had completed 10 or more Social Work courses. The age of participants ranges from 19 years to 60 plus years, with the most frequent appearing age of students being 19-22 years (55.1%). Consistent with the high concentration of women in the social work profession, 87.6% of respondents were female, 10.8% male, and .5% preferred not to answer. As shown in Table 1, 74.1% were Caucasian, 16.2% African American, 3.2% Hispanic, 2.2% Multi-racial, and 4.3% preferred not to answer. This reflects the overall population breakdown in Ohio by race/ethnicity. The majority of students are not members of NASW (83.8%) (See Table 3 below).

<b>Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Students in Sample (N = 185)</b>		
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	162	87.6
Male	20	10.8
Prefer not to answer	1	0.5
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	0	0
Black/African American	30	16.2
Hispanic/Latino	4	2.2
White/Caucasian	137	74.1
Multi-Racial	6	3.2
Prefer not to answer	8	4.3
<b>Age</b>		
19-22	102	55.1
23-29	28	15.1
30-39	22	11.9
40-49	17	9.2
50+	15	8.1
<b>Type of University</b>		
State/Public	150	81.1
Private	34	18.4
<b>Year in School</b>		
Sophomore	11	5.9
Junior	69	37.3
Senior	105	56.8
<b>NASW Member</b>		
Yes	25	13.5
No	155	83.8

## Religious Background

Almost 70% of the students in this sample currently identify as Christian (see Chart 1). Nondenominational Christians make up the largest percentage with 36.2%, followed by Catholic Christians (14.6%), Mainline Protestant Christians (11.4%), and Conservative/Fundamentalist Christians (7.6%). Interestingly, this sample also represented a diverse group of other religions including, 7.6% Agnostic, 7% Jewish, 3.8% Spiritist, 2.2% Atheist, 1.1% Muslim, 1.1% Buddhist, .5% Hindu, and 9.7% Undecided. Respondents are varied in their current level of religious activity, with 15.7% reporting that they attend religious services or activities more than once a week, 27.6% attend once a week, 15.7% once a month, 23.8% once or twice a year, and 16.2% never attend religious services. This study also found that an overwhelming percent of respondents (91.9%) were raised in a Christian religion (see Chart 1) and 75.6% attended religious services or activities at least once a week in their youth.



#### 4.2 Level of Spirituality of Social Work students

To address the first research question, the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale was used to assess the level of personal spirituality. The total scores ranged from 24-90 out of a possible range of 15-90. The mean score was 64.8, indicating a very high level of personal spirituality among bachelors of social work students (see Table 1 above). This mean score indicates that the majority of students have spiritual experiences at least most days. An analysis between spirituality and the demographic variables found a moderate correlation between race and spirituality ( $r = 0.285$ ;  $p < .01$ ), where minorities were more likely to be highly spiritual than non-minorities (see Table 4 below). This study also found a negative correlation between age and spirituality, where the younger students were more likely to report being highly spiritual than the older students ( $r = -0.155$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, the type of college (public or private) was not significantly correlated with spirituality (see Table 4 below), as normally expected.

<b>Table 3: DSES Correlations with Demographic Variables</b>					
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	-	0.014	0.007	0.151*	0.057
2. Type of College		-	0.018	-0.067	0.043
3. Race			-	0.097	0.285**
4. Age				-	-0.155*
5. Total DSES					-
Correlation is significant * $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$ , *** $p < .001$					



#### 4.3 Student perceptions of the role of religion and spirituality in the social work profession

The professional attitudes of social work students were measured using the ‘Role of Religion and Spirituality Scale’ constructed by Sheridan (1999). Total scores for this scale ranged from 45-90 out of a possible 18-90. The mean total score was 70.4, indicating that overall, students were very supportive of the inclusion of spirituality and religion into social work (see Table 1 above).

<b>Table 4: Total Level of Agreement with RRSP</b>		
Scores	n	%
<b>Disagree</b> 18-36	0	0%
<b>Neutral</b> 37-54	10	6.1%
<b>Agree</b> 55-90	154	93.9%

As shown above in Table 5, the total scores of the RRSP indicate that the great number of students agree that spirituality should be included in social work. In this study, 154 students (93.9%) agreed overall that spirituality and religion should have a role in social work. Ten students (6.1%), rated were neutral in their opinion about including spirituality and religion in social work practice. Unlike earlier studies, none of the students indicated an overall disagreement with the inclusion of spirituality. Overall, the students either favor or are neutral in their opinion on inclusion of spirituality and religion.

<b>Table 5: RRSP Correlations with Demographic Variables</b>					
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	-	0.011	0.007	0.151*	-0.095
2. Type of College		-	0.022	-0.071	0.057
3. Race			-	0.097	0.032
4. Age				-	-0.078
5. Total RRSP					-
Correlation is significant *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001					

To further test the relationship between demographics and the attitude towards inclusion of spirituality and religion (RRSP scale) a correlation coefficient analysis was undertaken. None of the demographic variables were found to be significantly correlated with the RRSP scale (see Table 6 above). This finding indicates that students support the inclusion of spirituality in social work, regardless of their gender, type of university at which they attend, race, or age. However, personal spirituality ( $r = .541$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and current religious service attendance ( $r = .557$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and religious service attendance as a child ( $r = .223$ ;  $p < .01$ ) were found to be highly correlated with the professional attitudes as measured by the RRSP (see Table 7 below). The more frequently a student attended religious services as a child, the more likely they are to support the inclusion of spirituality and religion in social work. This is also true of current attendance at religious events and services, even though for the sample overall, reporting of current attendance is less frequent than childhood attendance. It seems that past life experience and current behavior both are likely to influence one's attitude. Findings also imply that students who frequently attend religious services, currently or as a child, are more likely to be highly spiritual. The total spirituality score on the DSES was also significantly correlated with the total RRSP score ( $r = .541$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

<b>Table 6: Correlations of Total RRSP Score and Spiritual Variables</b>				
	1	2	3	4
1. Total RRSP	-	.511**	.244**	.541**
2. Current Religious Attendance		-	.305**	.577**
3. Youth Religious Attendance			-	.223**
4. Total Spirituality				-
Correlation is significant *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001				

#### 4.4 Students' perception of the role of spirituality and religion in social work practice

Overall, students overwhelmingly agree that spirituality and religion should be incorporated into social work practice. The majority of students agree that religious concerns (86.5%) and spiritual concerns (90.8%) are not outside the scope of social work practice. Similarly, students agree that social workers should be able to assess the positive role (84.3%) and negative role (77.8%) of religious and spiritual beliefs in client's lives. The majority of students also believe that social work practice with a spiritual component has a better chance to empower clients (56.7%). However, when asked about specifically how to incorporate spirituality and religion into practice, students were more likely to not have a specific response, most remained neutral. For example, when asked if it is appropriate for a social worker to use religious or spiritual texts with a client, 41.6% of students neither agreed nor disagreed. It is clear that students believe spirituality and religion should be incorporated into practice but it appears that students are less clear about how to do it.

#### Influence of Personal Spirituality on beliefs about Professional Practice

To further understand the influence of personal spirituality on professional attitudes, further testing was done between personal spirituality and individual items on the RRSP. This analysis revealed that even though the total scores of the two scales were significantly correlated,

certain items on the RRSP were not as highly correlated with personal spirituality indicators. All of the items on the RRSP were significantly correlated with the total personal spirituality score except two, Item 3, 'It is important for social workers to have knowledge about different religious faiths and traditions' and Item 11, 'The religious backgrounds of clients do not particularly influence the course or outcome of social work practice'. The lack of correlation with item 3 can be explained by the high percentage of students answering strongly agree (71.7%) and agree (23.2%). Overall, 94.9% of students agree that social workers should have knowledge about religious diversity.

From the correlations between each individual item on the DSES and the RRSP, four RRSP items were isolated that were not as highly correlated with the individual personal spirituality items as the rest of the DSES items. These items were all related to the application of incorporating spirituality and religion into social work practice, including belief about the religious background of clients influencing outcomes of practice, the use of religious texts with a client, praying with a client, and sharing personal spiritual beliefs with a client (See Table 8 below).

<b>Table 7: Correlations of Spirituality and RRSP Practice Items</b>								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Personal Spirituality								
1. Comfort in religion or spirituality	-							
2. Ask for God's help	.823**	-						
3. Feel God's love through others	.807**	.731**	-					
4. Thankful for blessings	.596**	.513**	.522**	-				
RRSP								
5. Religious background of client does not influence outcomes	-0.067	-.057	-.090	-.142	-			
6. Use of religious texts	0.109	.186*	0.094	.166*	-.150*	-		
7. Praying with client	0.063	-.097	-.097	-.057	.184*	-.104	-	
8. Sharing personal spiritual beliefs with client	.172*	.197**	0.109	0.07	0.026	.148*	-.169*	-
Correlation is significant *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001								

Further, as shown above, belief about the use of religious texts was significantly correlated with asking for God's help and being thankful for one's blessings. Sharing personal spiritual beliefs was significantly correlated with finding comfort in one's religion or spirituality and asking for God's help. It seems that students who find comfort or help in their religion or spirituality feel it might be helpful to share these beliefs with a client who is struggling. However, belief about the religious background of a client's influence on practice outcomes and praying with a client were not significantly correlated with any of the spirituality items. To test the association between the religious affiliation and specific RRSP items, a chi square was used. Only one item, 'belief about the religious background of client influencing practice' was associated with students religious affiliation ( $\chi^2 = 24.62$ ;  $p < .01$ ). It appears that this item is influenced by religious affiliation rather than spirituality, which explains the lack of correlation with the total DSES score discussed above.

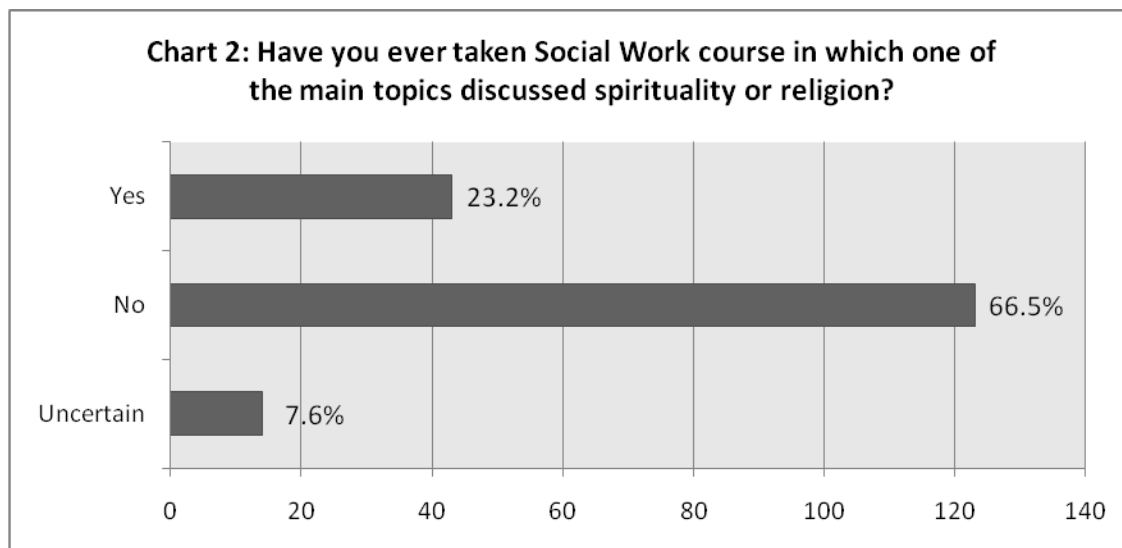
<b>Table 8: Chi Square of Religion and RRSP Item 11</b>				
	<b>Religious background of client does not influence outcomes</b>			
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	$\chi^2$
1. Catholic	17.2%	17.2%	0.0%	24.62**
2. Fundamentalist	6.3%	20.7%	0.0%	
3. Mainline Protestant	13.3%	6.9%	8.3%	
4. Nondenominational	32.8%	24.1%	70.8%	
Other				
5. Religions/Atheist	12.5%	10.3%	12.5%	
6. Agnostic/Undecided	18.0%	20.7%	8.3%	
Correlation is significant * $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$				

#### 4.5 Spirituality and Religion in Social Work Education

Two items on the RRSP specifically asked students' opinions on the importance of including content on religion and spirituality in practice. Most of the students agree (84.3% ) that content on religious and spiritual diversity should be included in social work education. Only 8.6% were neutral in their response and 3.3% disagreed. Similarly, a large percentage of students agree that content on how to deal with spiritual issues in practice should also be included in education (89.2% ). Responses to these items were also tested to see if there was difference based on the type of university the students attend and their current religious affiliation. None of the chi square values were significant (see Table 9 below). Regardless of the type of institution or religious affiliation, the majority of students believe that spirituality and religion should be included in social work education.

<b>Table 9: Inclusion of Spirituality and Religion in Social Work Education by Type of Institution and Religion Affiliation</b>								
	<b>Include content on spiritual and religious diversity</b>				<b>Include content on how to deal with spiritual issues in practice</b>			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	$\chi^2$	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	$\chi^2$
<b>1. Type of Institution</b>								
Public	85.7%	9.5%	4.8%	0.546	91.1%	6.8%	2.1%	2.979
Private	90.6%	6.3%	3.1%		100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
<b>2. Religion</b>								
Catholic	84.6%	11.5%	3.8%	3.935	96.2%	3.8%	0.0%	10.412
Conservative	85.7%	7.1%	7.1%		84.6%	15.4%	0.0%	
Protestant	78.9%	15.8%	5.3%		84.2%	10.5%	5.3%	
Nondenominational	90.9%	6.1%	3.0%		95.5%	1.5%	3.0%	
Other Religions/Atheist	81.8%	9.1%	9.1%		90.9%	9.1%	0.0%	
Agnostic/Undecided	87.1%	9.7%	3.2%		96.7%	3.3%	0.0%	

Contrary to the finding that students believe spirituality and religion are important components of their education, 66.5% of students said that they have never taken a social work course in which one of the main topics addressed issues of spirituality and religion (see Chart 2 below). Taking a social work course on spirituality or religion was significantly correlated with type of institution ( $r = -.364, p < .01$ ). This indicates that students attending private universities are more likely to receive content on spirituality and religion in the social work curriculum than students at public universities. However, when asked how prepared students feel to handle spiritual and religious issues in practice, students answered very prepared (15.7%), somewhat prepared (44.9%), neutral (12.4%), somewhat unprepared (18.9%), and very unprepared (5.4%). The perception of level of preparedness was negatively correlated to taking a course on spirituality or religion ( $r = -.309, p < .01$ ), indicating students who have taken a course feel less prepared than those who have not. Perception of preparedness was also significantly correlated with type of university ( $r = .198, p < .01$ ), private university students reported feeling more prepared to work with diverse client population than public. Perception of preparedness was also significantly correlated to total Spiritual Competence Scale scores ( $r = .279, p < .01$ ), indicating that students who feel their program integrates more spiritual competence also feel more prepared to handle these issues in practice. Student's perception of their preparedness was not significantly correlated with age, race, number of social work courses completed, level of spirituality, level of religiosity, or professional attitudes (RRSP).



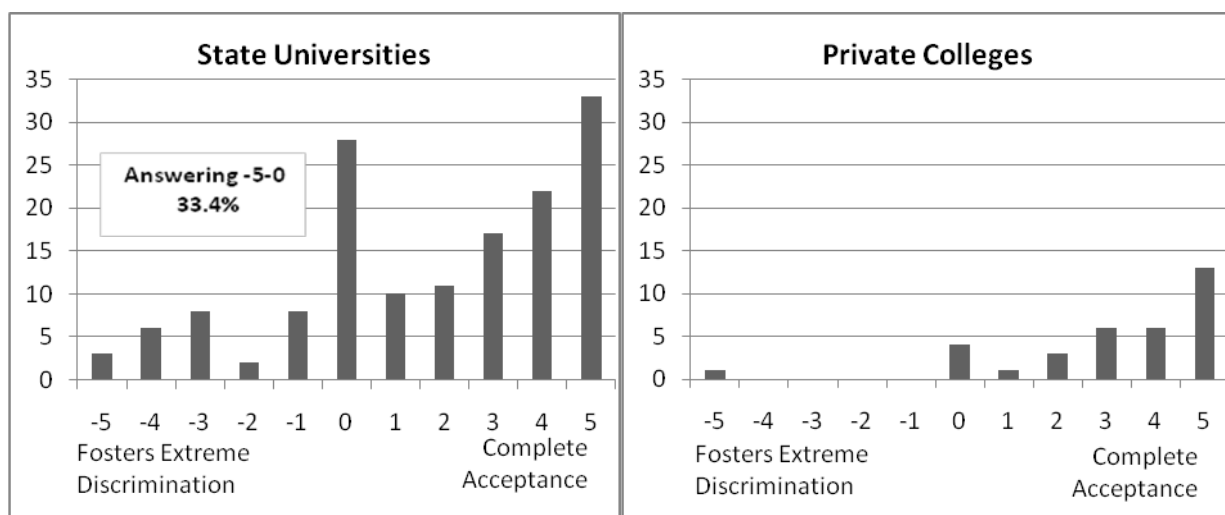
Students were also asked to assess the spiritual competence of their social work program through the Spiritual Competence Scale. Total scores for this sample ranged from -45 – 45, which is the maximum possible range for this scale. The mean score was 20.6 with a standard deviation of 19.5 (see Table 1). Responses to this scale were not significantly correlated to the other two major scales, the RRSP and DSES. However, the spiritual competence scale was significantly correlated with the type of university that students attended ( $r = .380$ ,  $p < .01$ , see Table 10 below). This finding indicates that overall, students at private college think that their social work programs are more spiritually competent than students attending public universities.

<b>Table 10: SCS Correlations with Demographic Variables</b>					
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	-	0.014	0.007	0.151*	-0.065
2. Type of College		-	0.018	-0.067	0.380**
3. Race			-	0.097	0.075
4. Age				-	0.087
5. Total SCS					-
Correlation is significant * $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$ , *** $p < .001$					



When asked about the extent to which religious discrimination was a problem in their respective social work program, majority of students (70%) stated that it was not a problem. However, 16.9% were neutral and 13.1% responded negatively. These responses differed by type of university the students attended. For example, 33.4% of students at state universities answered 0 or below when asked if religious discrimination is a problem in their social work program, compared to 14.7% of students from private universities who had similar response (see chart 3 below).

***Chart 3: To what extent is religious discrimination a problem in your Social Work program?***



## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Discussion

### Professional Attitudes and Professional Practice

The professional attitudes of Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) students surveyed are very much in favor of the inclusion of spirituality in social work. The RRSP scale measures professional attitudes towards spirituality and religion and a higher score predicts greater support for the inclusion of spirituality and religion into the profession of social work. The mean RRSP score in this study was 70.4 (ranging 45-90) which is similar but slightly higher than Graff's (2007) survey of BSW students. The scores in Graff's study ranged from 30 to 86 with a mean of 66.38. Another recent study with practitioners yielded a mean score of 68.7 (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007) consistent with other studies. Student in this study were more neutral towards the use of spiritual and religious interventions than Graff (2007). For example, when asked if it is appropriate to use religious texts with a client, 31.9% of the students in this study disagree while 50% of Graff's respondents disagreed. A considerable percent of students in this study were neutral in their response (41.6% - neither agreed nor disagreed). Existing research identifies professional attitudes as the most important predictor of intervention use in practice (Heyman, Buchanan, Musgrave et al., 2006, Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2008, Murdock, 2005, Sheridan, 2004). Even though the undergraduate students in this sample are not currently practicing, their professional attitudes are more likely to shape their future work with clients. Therefore, the highly positive view of spirituality and religion found in this sample indicate that these students are likely to incorporate spirituality and religion into their professional practice. The lack of significant relationships between the RRSP score and demographic variables indicates that regardless of gender, age, race, and type of institution, students overwhelmingly support the inclusion of spirituality and religion in social work.

### Personal Spirituality and Professional Attitudes

This sample of undergraduate social work students reported a very high level of spirituality. This finding is consistent with Graff (2007) wherein 94% of BSW students believed in a God who is active in the world. Interestingly, Stewart, Koeske, and Koeske (2006) found that African American respondents were significantly more spiritual than Caucasian respondents, which is consistent with the finding in this study. Minority students were more likely to be highly spiritual than non-minority students.

The study found that professional attitudes about spirituality and religion are strongly correlated with personal spirituality and religious service attendance. This finding is consistent with a growing body of literature connecting personal spirituality with professional attitudes and use of spiritual interventions in practice. In their pathway factor analysis, Kvarfordt and Sheridan (2009) found that personal spirituality appears to be an important first link, in a chain of factors which cause practice behaviors. The significant correlation found in this study between spirituality and attitudes is consistent with the first step in Kvarfordt & Sheridan's model which suggests that 'Personal Religious/Spiritual Practices influences professional attitudes and Practice-Related Experiences which in turn can impact the intervention one uses. Another model found that spirituality directly affects the utilization of religious interventions, rather than affecting it indirectly through shaping attitudes and perceptions (Stewart, Koeske, & Koeske 2006). Research has consistently shown personal spiritual and religious variables to be predictors of higher intervention use (Heyman, Buchanan, Musgrave et al., 2006, Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2008, Murdock, 2005, Senstoack & Van Asselt, 2009, Sheridan, 2004). As these BSW students will soon be practicing social workers, it is likely that their high level of spirituality will result in more frequent use of spiritual interventions with clients.

However, the high number of neutral responses to questions about the appropriateness of specific interventions likely indicates that students are unclear about how to implement the use of spirituality and religion in their work with clients. Students are clearly in favor of the inclusion of spirituality but they are less clear in their understanding of how it should be done. This uncertainty points back to social work education to be training students to ethically and competently manage these issues in practice.

### State of Spirituality in Social Work Education

Students agree that content on spirituality and religion should be included in social work education. Overall, 84.3% agreed that social work education should include content on religious and spiritual diversity and 89.2% agreed to include content on how to effectively deal with religious and spiritual issues in practice. This finding was mirrored in the Graff study (2007) with 82.1% and 87.6% respectively. However, results of this study show an obvious discrepancy between what they students believe is a vital part of their education, and the content they are actually receiving. The finding that 67% of students have never received course content on spirituality or religion is consistent with over 15 other studies of social work practitioners, educators, and students, all which reported between 66% and 89% of respondents received little to no instruction on spirituality or religion during their social work education (Sheridan, 2009). The oldest of these studies was conducted in 1992, indicating that social work education has changed very little over the last 20 years.

Another notable finding related to education is the negative association between students receiving course content on spirituality and religion and their level of perceived preparedness to handle these issues in practice. This lack of educational effect is also found in the literature

where educational variables were found to have little to no effect on intervention use (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2008). It is probable that the limited impact of education is relative to the minimal exposure to content on religious and spiritual issues in their professional education.

Results of the Spiritual Competence Scale indicate that public undergraduate social work programs are more likely to discriminate, censor, and be less open to expressing religious and spiritual beliefs than private universities. Although this is a relatively new scale and no data could be found for comparison, it is clear that students at public universities feel their educational programs need to improve their spiritual competence.

## Chapter 6: Implications and Limitations

### 6.1 Implications

#### Implications for Policy

Even though there is a body of literature spanning over 20 years calling for the inclusion of spirituality and religion into social work education, very little has changed in the educational system. It is time for the profession to take action to ensure future social workers are prepared for the challenges they will face with these issues in practice. The population is constantly changing due to globalization and the populations that social workers serve are also rapidly diversifying. It is now more likely than ever that social workers will encounter diverse religious and spiritual beliefs in practice.

Schools of social work need to thoroughly investigate their current level of inclusion of spiritual course content and the methods used to train students in its application. To ensure that students and faculty feel safe to explore and discuss issues of spirituality, schools should review existing policies, both explicit and implicit, regarding the treatment of religion and spirituality in their programs. The current data suggests that private colleges are more open to integration of spirituality and religion in their courses than public universities. However, regardless of the type of university, social work educational institutions should take the initiative to understand how these issues are taught in the classroom. Faculty should be trained on how to facilitate open conversation about religion and spirituality and promote introspection of one's own spirituality while being sensitive to other cultural beliefs. If nowhere else, schools of social work should be the place where these often avoided yet crucial conversations about spirituality are embraced in the interest of competent and ethical practice.

Furthermore, change in social work education is usually driven by governing bodies and ethical standards. The Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers both explicitly call for the inclusion of spirituality and religion in social work for the purpose for cultural competence. Therefore, embracing spirituality and religion into social work education would uphold the professional standards. However, these governing bodies should use their authority to actively promote and enforce the inclusion of spirituality and religion into undergraduate education. The lack of specific guidelines may be contributing to the slow response to the call for inclusion of spirituality and religion. The CSWE and the NASW should outline specific expectations and recommendations for social work education to follow which will guide the process of implementing curriculum changes.

### Implications for Practice

While it is necessary that social work students gain knowledge about spirituality and religion, it is even more crucial that they be able to apply this education in practice. Practical training begins in social work practice courses, where students are taught strategies for implementing knowledge and theory into their work with clients. Spirituality and religion should be integrated into these practice classes so that students gain exposure to methods of spiritual assessment and interventions to use with clients. There are many innovative tools being developed for engaging client spirituality and religion that could be presented in these courses (Hodge, 2005, Waller & Sori, 2006). Also, methods of instruction using role-plays, modeling, cultural exposure assignments would all be useful in helping students gain skill to engage issues of spirituality and religion in practice. Additionally, a great deal of practice instruction occurs in a student's field placement. Colleges should offer training for field instructors on spirituality and religion in order that they may integrate these topics with students in field placements. Research

has found that the majority of social workers trained in the past 20 years have not received training on spirituality and religion in their professional education. Therefore, universities and the NASW should offer workshops and continuing education to better equip current practitioners to engage spirituality and religion in their current practice.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Studies show for the past 15 years, the rate of integration of spirituality and religion in education as reported by the respondents remains stagnant (Sheridan, 2009). There has been a movement in the field to integrate course content but has not been successful. It is speculated that a reason for lack of integration may be due to deficits in active engagements of student and faculty feedback on the content of the curriculum. Therefore, a well thought through process for gaining input to help substantiate the core curriculum content on spirituality would be beneficial. It is suggested that a study be conducted using focus groups to gather student and faculty input into the development of spiritual and religious course content. This would further the understanding of their current experiences as well as collect ideas for implementing changes. Course content should then be developed and piloted in a few schools, both public and private. The curriculum should be tested for effectiveness using a pre-post evaluation model. Strategies used in adult learning pedagogical models should be considered when designing the new course content.

Studies show that the two most important predictors of use of spiritual interventions in practice are personal spirituality and professional attitudes. This study confirms a strong correlation between personal spirituality and professional attitudes ( $r = , p < .01$ ). To further understand the development of personal spirituality, professional attitudes, and the



interrelationship between the two, future research should to collect longitudinal data from social work students as they move through their undergraduate and graduate education. This would help explain the factors that influence the development of these attitudes and if education has an effect over time.

Although there was some religious diversity represented in this sample, the vast majority are Christian or were raised Christian. This is also true of most other studies reviewed in the literature. It would be interesting to recruit individuals from diverse religious backgrounds and explore their experiences and attitudes more thoroughly.

As noted in the limitations section, future studies need to increase sample sizes to make the findings generalizable to the larger population of undergraduate social work students.

## 6.2 Limitations

Interpretation of study findings must always account for methodological limitations. First, as previously mentioned, it is impossible to assess the adequacy of the response rate, as not list exists of how many students in the target population have completed the required three social work courses. Future studies should consider using other criteria for qualification such as class rank (junior, senior etc.) that would allow for easier comparison. Secondly, the efficacy of this study relied on the compliance of program administrators with the research protocol. There is no way of knowing to what degree they followed the researcher's instructions when disseminating the survey. Student responses could have been affected if they deviated from the protocol i.e. adding to the solicitation email, delaying to send the surveys etc. Additionally, the small sample size could have prevented some of the statistical tests and chi squares from showing significance. A larger sample would include more variance in responses and may reveal further correlations

among the variables. To increase student participation, the time allotted for completing the survey should be increased. Two weeks seems to be an inadequate amount of time for solicitation of survey completion, as students tend to postpone engagement in activities that are not of high priority. In order to increase the response rate, one should be aware of the timing for initial recruitment of programs. Programs should be contacted early during the quarter or semester as it is difficult to access administrators at the end of a semester and over breaks. The inability to contact program administrators decreased the opportunity to recruit more schools to participate.

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## Appendix A: Formal Solicitation Letter to Program Administrators

Dear Social Work Director,

I am writing to invite your Social Work program to participate in an exciting and ground breaking research project. Spirituality is a topic often confused, mistreated, and avoided in the Social Work profession. However, most clients hold some spiritual belief and consider that belief to be a strength. As Social Workers seeking to provide holistic services, it is imperative we become better equipped to engage clients on their spiritual and religious beliefs. The NASW Code of Ethics compels us to become culturally competent with the populations we serve, including respect of religious diversity. As you know, Bachelors programs are the training ground for the next generation of Social Workers. Their beliefs and values will shape the future of the profession and the future role of spirituality and religion in Social Work practice.

I am proud to introduce to you the research team of BSW student Stephanie Neal and Dr. Shantha Balaswamy from the Ohio State University, College of Social Work. This year, they will be exploring Bachelors of Social Work students' personal and professional perspectives on the role of religion and spirituality in Social Work. Your Bachelors of Social Work students are invited to participate in this study and make their opinions some of the first to be heard on this subject. And you will be among the first to receive the results of this study!

But we need your help to make this project a success! We are asking if you would partner with us in helping disseminate the online survey to students in your program by forwarding an email containing the link to the survey to your students. The email will be sent in January 2011.

The student, Stephanie Neal, will be contacting you shortly to follow-up about your Social Work program's participation in this research. I sincerely hope you will partner with NASW in making this exciting research a success.

Sincerely,

Cindy Webb  
Director, NASW – Ohio Chapter

## Appendix B: Student Solicitation Email

Dear Student,

We are contacting you with an opportunity to share your personal and professional perspectives on the role of spirituality and religion in Social Work. The survey asks about your professional and personal beliefs about spirituality and your experience in your undergraduate program. We invite you to consider completing this survey as you are among the first undergraduate students to be asked their opinions on this topic. This email contains the link to an online survey.

This research is supported by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Ohio State University - College of Social Work. Indeed, your participation in this study will provide valuable information which will shape and inform discussion on the role of spirituality in Social Work and be used to develop curriculum for undergraduates.

Reports or presentations made to any audience will be in aggregate form and will not contain personal identifiable information. You are asked only to respond to the best of your ability--there are no right or wrong answers. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will not be asked to report any identifying information or the college you attend. Your answers will not reflect upon your college. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your status with OSU or your home institution. Some psychological stress may result is spirituality or religion is a sensitive topic for a participant. Although every effort to protect confidentiality will be made, no guarantee of internet security can be given as, although unlikely, transmissions can be intercepted and IP addresses can be identified.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, please contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

Participation is voluntary and takes approximately **15-20 minutes**. By agreeing to participate, you may chose to enter a drawing for one of two **\$50 amazon.com gift cards**.

To begin, [click here ; link inserted].

We very much appreciate you considering to participate in this study. Again, the survey should take about **15-20 minutes** of your time.

Thank you for your participation,

Stephanie Neal  
BSW Student, The Ohio State University

Cindy Webb  
NASW Ohio Director

Dr. Shantha Balaswamy  
CSW Professor, The Ohio State University

For questions, concerns, complaints, or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation you may contact Dr. Shantha Balaswamy at 614-292-6632.

## Appendix C: Online Student Survey Instrument

### BSW Student Survey

Thank you for your interest in this survey!

All of your answers will be confidential. Reports or presentations made to any audience will be in aggregate form and will not contain personal identifiable information. You are asked only to respond to the best of your ability--there are no right or wrong answers, and you can exit the survey at any time. You will not be asked to report any identifying information or the college you attend. Your answers will not reflect upon your college.

Participation is voluntary and takes approximately **15-20 minutes**. By agreeing to participate you may chose to enter a drawing for one of two **\$50 amazon.com gift cards**. If you wish to be entered into the drawing, enter your email address below.

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ (enter here)

Participation is optional and you do not have to give your email address to participate in the survey. Email addresses are collected for the sole purpose of the drawing and will be removed before data is analyzed.

**By clicking “I Agree” below, I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.**

**I Agree**



How many semester or quarters have you completed in your Social Work curriculum?  
Drop down list 0-10

If less than 3,

You are ineligible to participate in this survey. Thank you for your time. You will still be entered into the drawing for the \$50 gift card.

If 3 or more, will proceed to next question.

What is your current year in the Social Work program?

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

With which race/ethnicity do you most closely identify?

- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Multi-racial

What is your current age?

Drop down list

What type of university or college do you attend?

- ☐ State/Public
- ☐ Private non-religious
- ☐ Private religious

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements.

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human.					
Social workers should become more sophisticated than they are now in spiritual matters.					
It is important for social workers to have knowledge about different religious faiths and traditions.					
Religious concerns are outside of the scope of social work practice.					
Spiritual concerns are outside of the scope of social work practice.					
Social work practice with a spiritual component has a better chance to empower clients than practice without such a component.					
Knowledge of clients' religious or spiritual belief systems is important for effective social work practice.					
Social workers should be able to assess the positive or beneficial role of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices in clients' lives.					
Social workers should be able to assess the negative or harmful role of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices in clients' lives.					
The use of religious language, metaphors, and concepts in social work practice is inappropriate.					
The religious backgrounds of clients do not particularly influence the course or outcome of social work practice.					
A social worker's use of scripture or other religious texts in practice is appropriate.					
It is against social work ethics to ever pray with a client.					

The use of spiritual language, metaphors, and concepts in social work language is inappropriate.					
It is sometimes appropriate for a social worker to share his/her own religious or spiritual beliefs with a client.					
Addressing a client's religious or spiritual beliefs is necessary for holistic social work.					
Social work education should include content on religious and spiritual diversity.					
Social work education should include content on how to effectively deal with religious or spiritual issues in practice.					

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements.

In the next section, you will be asked to assess your perception of your Social Work program. Please answer honestly. You will not be asked which college you attend.

To what degree does your social work program foster respect for religious and spiritual cultures?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Fosters Extreme Disrespect

Fosters extreme Respect

How acceptable is it in your social work program to share religious or spiritual views?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Completely unacceptable

Completely acceptable

To what extent does your social work program foster sensitivity toward religious or spiritual beliefs?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Fosters extreme insensitivity

Fosters extreme sensitivity

To what extent does the atmosphere in your social work program foster respect for religious and spiritual perspectives?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Fosters Extreme Disrespect

Fosters extreme Respect

To what degree are religious and spiritual believers free to express themselves in your social work program?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Must always censor or guard themselves

Totally free to express themselves

If religious or spiritual perspectives are shared in your social work program, to what extent are they valued?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Totally disrespected

Totally respected

To what extent does your social work program foster an empathic understanding of religious and spiritual worldviews?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Fosters complete misunderstanding

Fosters complete understanding

When it comes to learning about the religious and spiritual worldviews that clients commonly affirm, how much openness does your program demonstrate?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Completely closed

Completely open

To what extent, if any, is religious discrimination a problem in your Social Work program?

-5    -4    -3    -2    -1    0    1    2    3    4    5

Extreme Discrimination

Complete Acceptance

The list that follows includes items you may or may not experience. Please consider how often you directly have this experience, and try to disregard whether you feel you should or should not have these experiences. A number of items use the word ‘God.’ If this word is not a comfortable one for you, please substitute another word which calls to mind the sacred or holy for you.

	Many times a day	Every day	Most days	Some days	Once in a while	Never or almost never
I feel God’s presence.						
I experience a connection to all of life.						
During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns						
I find strength in my religion or spirituality.						
I find comfort in my religion or spirituality.						
I feel deep inner peace or harmony.						
I ask for God’s help in the midst of daily activities.						
I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.						
I feel God’s love for me, directly.						
I feel God’s love for me, through others.						
I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.						
I feel thankful for my blessings.						
I feel a selfless caring for others.						
I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong						
I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine.						

	Not at all	Somewhat close	Very close	As close as possible
In general, how close do you feel to God?				

With which religious or faith tradition do you currently identify?

- ☐ Catholic Christian
- ☐ Conservative/Fundamentalist Christian
- ☐ Mainline Protestant Christian
- ☐ Nondenominational Christian
- ☐ Islam
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Spiritist
- ☐ Atheist
- ☐ Agnostic
- ☐ Undecided

How often do you currently attend religious services or activities?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or twice a year
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ More than once a week

In which religious or faith tradition were you raised?

- ☐ Catholic Christian
- ☐ Conservative/Fundamentalist Christian
- ☐ Mainline Protestant Christian
- ☐ Nondenominational Christian
- ☐ Islam
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Spiritist
- ☐ Atheist
- ☐ Agnostic
- ☐ Undecided

How often did you attend religious services or activities in your youth?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once or twice a year
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ More than once a week



Have you ever taken a Social Work course in which one of the main topics discussed issues of spirituality or religion?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Do not remember/uncertain

How prepared do you feel to handle spiritual and religious issues in your future social work practice?

- ☐ Very prepared
- ☐ Somewhat prepared
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat unprepared
- ☐ Very unprepared

Are you a member of the National Association of Social Workers?

Yes/no

From your exposure to Social Work through your educational, work, and personal experience, what is your perception of the Social Work profession's level of compliance with the following standards:

Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect religion.

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
No compliance											Perfect Compliance

Social workers should avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues due to their religion.

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
No compliance											Perfect Compliance

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of religion.

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
No compliance											Perfect Compliance

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of religion.

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
No compliance											Perfect Compliance

Thank you for your participation in this survey! Your time and your opinions are truly valuable.

You will be contacted by email if you are selected as a winner of a \$50 amazon.com gift card.

For further information or for results of this study, contact the Ohio State University – College of Social Work or the NASW Ohio Chapter.